# A Journey Into the Sea of White Shadows

## A New and Absorbing Account of Life in Realms Where It Is Always Summer

IT'S an alluring picture Frederick O'Brien paints in "White Shadows in the South Seas," just published by the Century Company; and it's an absorbing narrative, rich in tropical beauty, full of a penetrating spirit of strangeness and mystery, and constantly touched by a sense of the fundamental friendliness which distinguishes human nature taken by and large.

The book carries us far into warm, little known waters. We are aboard the stanch Morning Star. Here is a picture:

I SLEPT on the deck. It was sickeningly hot below. The squalls had passed, and as we neared Hiva-oa the sea became glassy smooth, but the leagues-long, lazy roll of it rocked the schooner like a cradle.

The night before the islands were to come into view the sea was lit by phosphorescence so magnificently that even my shipmates, absorbed in écarté below, called to one another to view it. The engine took us along at about six knots, and every gentle wave that broke was a lamp of loveliness. The wake of the morning star was a milky path lit with trembling fragments of brilliancy, and below the surface, beside the rudder, was a strip of green light from which a billion sparks of fire shot to the air. Far behind, until the horizon closed upon the ocean, our wake was curiously remindful of the boulevard of a great city seen through a mist, the lights fading in the dim distance, but sparkling still.

I went forward and stood by the cathead. The blue water stirred by the bow was wonderfully bright, a mass of coruscating phosphorescence that lighted the prow like a lamp. It was as if lightning played beneath the waves, so luminous, so scintillating the water and its reflection upon the ship.

### *En Fete*

The living organisms of the sea were en fête that night, as though to celebrate my coming to the islands of which I had so long dreamed. I smiled at the fancy, well knowing that the minute pyrocistis, having come to the surface during the calm that followed the storms, were showing in that glorious fire the panic caused among them by the cataclysm of our passing. But the individual is ever an egoist. It seems to man that the universe is a circle about him and his affairs. It may as well seem the same to the pyrocistis.

Far about the ship the waves twinkled in green fire, disturbed even by the ruffling breeze. I drew up a bucketful of the water. In the darkness of the cabin it gave no light until I passed my hand through it. That was like opening a door into a room flooded by electricity; the table, the edges of the bunks, the uninterested faces of my shipmates, leaped from the shadows. Marvels do not seem marvellous to men who live among them.

Along comes a certain McHenry, with a tale of a Kanaka youngster:

"NOW there was a kid, a little Penryn boy," he said suddenly. "When I was a trader on Penryn he was there, and he used to come around my store. That kid liked me. Why, that kid, he was crazy about me! It's a fact, he was crazy about me, that kid was."

His voice was fumbling back toward its old assurance, but there was wonder in it, as though he was incredulous of this foothold he had stumbled upon. He repeated, "That kid was crazy about me!

"He used to hang around, and help me with the canned goods, and he'd go fishing with me, and shooting. He was a regular—what do you call 'em? These dogs that go after things for you? He'd go under the water and bring in the big fish for me. And he liked to do it. You never saw anything like the way that kid was.

"I used to let him come into the store and hang around, you know. Not that I cared anything for the kid myself; I ain't that kind. But I'd just give him some tinned biscuits now and then, the way you'd do. He didn't have no father or mother. His father had been eaten by a shark, and his mother was dead. The kid didn't have any name because his mother had died so young he hadn't got any name, and his father hadn't called him anything but boy. He give himself a name to me, and that was 'Your Dog.'

"He called himself my dog, you see. But his name for it was Your Dog, and that was because he fetched and carried for me, like as if he was one. He was that kind of kid. Not that I paid much attention to him.

"You know there's a leper settlement on Penryn, off across the lagoon. I ain't afraid of leprosy, y' understand, because I dealt with 'em for years, ate with 'em an' slept with 'em, an' all that, like everybody down here. But all the same I don't want to have 'em right around me all the time. So one day the doctor come to look over the natives, and he comes an' told me the little kid, My Dog, was a leper.

"Now I wasn't attached to the kid. I ain't attached to nobody. I ain't that kind of a man. But the kid was sort of used to me, and I was used to havin' him around. He used to come in through the window. He'd just come in, nights, and sit there an' never say a word. When I was goin' to bed he'd say, 'McHenry, Your Dog is goin' now, but can't Your Dog sleep here?' Well, I used to let him sleep on the floor, no harm in that. But if he was a leper he'd got to go to the settlement, so I told him so.

### *Then He Went*

"He made such a fuss, cryin' around—by God, I had to boot him out of the place. I said: 'Get out. I don't want you snivellin' around me.' So he went.

"It's a rotten, God-forsaken place, I guess. I don't know. The government takes care of 'em. It ain't my affair. I guess for a leper colony it ain't so bad.

"Anyway, I was goin' to sell out an' leave Penryn. The diving season was over. One night I had the door locked an' was goin' over my accounts to see if I couldn't collect some more dough from the natives. I heard a noise, and by God, there comin' through the window was My Dog. He come up to me, and I said: 'Stand away, there!' I ain't afraid of leprosy, but there's no use takin' chances. You never know.

"Well sir, that kid threw himself down on the floor, and he said, 'McHenry, I knowed you was goin' away and I had to come to see you.' That's what he said in his Kanaka lingo.

"He was cryin', and he looked pretty bad. He said he couldn't stand the settlement. He said, 'I don't never see you there. Can't I live here an' be Your Dog again?'

"I said, 'You got to go to the settlement.' I wasn't goin' to get into trouble on account of no Kanaka kid.

"Now, that kid had swum about five miles in the night, with sharks all around him—the very place where his father had gone into a shark. That kid thought a lot of me. Well, I made him go back. 'If you don't go, the doctor will come, an' then you got to go,' I said. 'You better get out. I'm goin' away, anyhow,' I said. I was figuring on my accounts, an' I didn't want to be bothered with no fool kid.

"Well, he hung around awhile, makin' a fuss, till I opened the door an' told him to git. Then he went quiet enough. He went right down the beach into the water an' swum away, back to the settlement.

"Now look here, that kid liked me. He knowed me well, too—he was around my store pretty near all the time I was in Penryn. He was a fool kid, My Dog, that was the name he give himself. An' while I was in Tyti, here, I get a letter from the trader that took over my store, and he sent me a letter from that kid. It was wrote in Kanaka. He couldn't write much, but a little. Here, I'll show you the letter. You'll see what that kid thought of me."

In the light from the open cabin window I read the letter, painfully written on cheap, blue-lined paper.

"Greetings to you, McHenry, in Tahiti, from Your Dog. It is hard to live without you. It is long since I have seen you. It is hard. I go to join my father. I give myself to the 'mako.' To you, McHenry, from Your Dog, greetings and farewell."

Across the bottom of the letter was written in English: "The kid disappeared from the leper settlement. They think he drowned himself."

For many days the ship sailed on:

STRAIGHT across the channel we steered for Hana Hevane, a little bay and valley guarded by sunken coral rocks, over which the water foamed in white warning. Two of the men leaped out into the waves and hunted on these rocks for squids, while we beached the boat on a shore uninhabited by any living creature but rats, lizards and centipedes.

Several small octopi were soon brought in, and one of the men placed them on some bowlders where the tide had left pools of water, and cleaned them of their poison. He rubbed them on the stone exactly as a washerwoman handles a flannel garment, and out of them came a lather as though he had soaped them. Suds, bubbles, and froth—one would have said a laundress had been at work there. He dipped them often in a pool of salt water, and not until they would yield no more suds did he give each a final rinsing and throw it on the fire made on the beach.

Suddenly a shout broke my absorption in this task. The son of Ugh! with the gold earrings, waving his arms from amidst the surf on the reef, called to me to come and see a big feke. As his companions were dancing about and yelling madly, I left the laundrying of the small sea devils and splashed two hundred yards through the lagoon to the scene of excitement.

### *The Devilfish*

Four of the crew had attacked a giant devilfish, which was hidden in a cave in the rocks. From the gloom it darted out its long arms and tried to seize the strange creatures that menaced it. The naked boatsmen, dancing just out of reach of the writhing tentacles, struck at them with long knives. As they cut off pieces of the curling, groping gristle, I thought I heard a horrible groan from the cave, almost like the voice of a human in agony. I stayed six feet away, for I had no knife and no relish for the game.

Four of the long arms had been severed at the ends, when suddenly the octopus came out of his den to fight for his life. He was a reddish-purple globe of horrid flesh, horned all over, with a head not unlike an elephant's, but with large, demoniacal eyes, bitter, hating eyes that roved from one to another of us, as if selecting his prey. Eight arms, some shorn of their suckers, stretched out ten feet toward us.

The Marquesans retreated precipitately, and I led them, laughing nervously, but not joyously. The son of Ugh! stopped first.

"Ta! Ta! Ta! Ta!" he cried. "Are we afraid of that ugly beast? I have killed many. Fakeka! We will eat him, too!"

He turned with the others and advanced toward the feke, shouting scornful names at him, threatening him with death and being eaten, warning him that the sooner he gave up the quicker ended his agony. But the devilfish was not afraid. His courage shamed mine. I was behind the barrier of the boatsmen, but once in the throes of the fight a slimy arm passed between two of them and wound itself around my leg. I screamed out, for it was icy cold and sent a sickening weakness all through me, so that I could not have swum a dozen feet with it upon me. One of the natives cut it off, and still it clung to my bloodless skin until I plucked it away.

The son of Ugh! had two of the great arms about him at one time, but his companions hacked at them until he was free. Then, regardless of the struggles of the maimed devil, they closed in on him and stabbed his head and body until he died. During these last moments I was amazed and sickened to hear the octopus growling and moaning in its fury and suffering. His voice had a curious timbre. I once heard a man dying of hydrophobia make such sounds, half animal, half human.

"The feke would have killed and eaten any one of us," said the son of Ugh! "Not many are so big as he, but here in Hana Hevane, where seldom any one fished, they are the biggest in the world. They lie in these holes in the rocks and catch fish and crabs as they swim by. My cousin was taken by one while fishing, and was dragged down into the hidden caverns. He was last seen standing on a ledge, and the next day his bones were found picked clean. A shark is easier to fight than such a devil who has so many arms."

The boatsmen gathered up the remnants of the foe and brought them to the beach, where the elder Ugh! was tending the fire. Crabs were broiling upon it, and the pieces of the feke were flung beside them and the smaller octopi.

When they were cooked, a trough of popoi and one of feikai, or roasted breadfruit mixed with a cocoanut-milk sauce, were placed on the sand, and all squatted to dine. For a quarter of an hour the only sounds were the plup of fingers withdrawn from mouths filled with popoi, and the faint creaming of waves on the beach. Marquesans feel that eating is serious business. The devilfish and crabs were the delicacies, and served as dessert. Blackened by the fire, squid and crustacean were eaten without condiment, the tentacles being devoured as one eats celery.

The writer describes a vivid drama in which the characters were whales and sharks:

WE had gone one morning about the southern cape, and were harpooning swordfish and the gigantic sunfish when a commotion a thousand feet away brought shouts of warning from my companions. We saw two whales, one with a baby at her breast. The other we took to be the father whale. Huge black beasts they were. Upon this mated pair a band of sharks had flung themselves to seize the infant.

There were at least twenty-five sharks in the mad mob, great white monsters thirty feet in length, maneaters by blood-taste, tigers in disposition. Though they could not compare with their [illegible] in size or power, they had heads large as [illegible] and mouths that would drag a man through their terrible gaps. That their hunger was past all bounds was evident, for the whale is not often attacked by such inferior sized fish. Storms had raged on the sea for days and maybe had cheated the sharks of their usual food.

### *The Battle*

They swam around and around the mountainous pair, darting in and out, evidently with some plan of drawing off the male. Both the whales struck out incessantly with their mammoth flukes; their great tails, crashing upon the sea surface, lashed it to mountains of foam. Our boats tossed as in a gale.

Carried away by the pity and terror of the scene, we shouted threats and curses at the monsters, calling down on them in Marquesan the wrath of the sea gods. Frenziedly handling tiller and sails, we circled the battle, impotent to aid the poor woman-beast and her baby. The sharks harried them as hounds a fox. Desperately the parents fought, more than one shark sank wounded to the depths and one, turning its white belly to the sun, floated dead upon the waves. Another was flung high in air by a blow of the mother's tail. But it was an uneven contest. At last we saw the nursling drawn from her breast, and the mother herself sank, still struggling. She may have risen, of course, far away, but she seemed disabled.

We did not wait about that bloody spot when the sharks had fallen upon their prey, for our canoe was low in the water, and with such a sight to warn us, we did not doubt that the lonthly monsters would attack us.

The narrative is peppered with valuable observations in the realm of ethics and morals. Here, for instance, is an interesting bit:

I HAVE had my trousers lifted from my second-story room in a Manila hotel by the eyed and fingered bamboo of the Tagalog ladron, while I washed my face, and stood aghast at the mystery of their disappearance with door locked, until looking from my windows I beheld them moving rapidly down an estero in a banca. I have given over my watch to a gendarme in Cairo to forfend arrest for having beaten an Arab who tripped me to pick my pocket, and I have surrendered to the rapacity of a major-general-uniformed official in Italy, who would incarcerate me for not having a tail-light lit. In San Francisco, when robbed upon the public street, I have listened while the police suggested that I offer a fee to the "king of the dips" and a reward to certain saloonkeepers to intercede with the unknown-to-me highwaymen for the return of an heirloom.

Yet, through the darkest nights in Vait-hua I slept serenely, surrounded by all the possessions so desirable in the eyes of my neighbors, in a house the doors of which were never fastened. There was not a lock in all the village, or anything that answered the purpose of one. The people of this isolated valley, forgetting their brief encounter with the European idea of money and of the accumulation of property, had reverted to the ways of their fathers.

And we are taken to church—not a native affair, but a real Catholic church, holding its own in the midst of a pagan jungle:

THE church was painted white inside, with frescoes and dadoes of gaudy hues and windows of brilliantly colored glass. The altar, as also the statues of Joseph and Mary, had a reredos handsomely carved. Outside the railing was a charming Child in the Manger, lying on real straw, surrounded by the Virgin, Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, and the kings, all in bright-hued robes, and pleasant-looking cows and asses with red eyes and green tails.

The singing began before the priest came from the sacristy. The men sang alone and the women followed, in an alternating chant that at times rose into a wail and again had the nasal sound of a bagpipe. The Catholic chants sung thus in Marquesan took on a wild, barbaric rhythm that thrilled the blood and made the hair tingle on the scalp.

Bishop David le Cadre appeared in elegant vestments, his eyes grave above a foot-long beard, and the mass began. The acolyte was very agile in a short red cassock, below which his naked legs and bare feet showed. The people responded often through the mass, rising, sitting down, and kneeling obediently. Baufré sat on a chair in the vestibule and added accounts.

Ah Kee Au was the sole communicant at the rail. No cloth was spread, but the bell announced the mystery of transsubstantiation, and all bowed their heads while Ah Kee Au reverently offered his communion to the welfare of Napoleon, his grandson, who had accidentally shot himself.

The service over, the people poured from the church into the brilliant sunshine of the road, and Ah Kee Au said to me, "You savee thlat communio' blead b'long my place. My son makee for pliest." Lam Kai Oo, pressing forward, offered the communicant a draught of fiery rum he had obtained by the governor's permission. He had been told that to give a glass of water to a communicant, who must of course have fasted and abstained from any liquid since midnight, according to the law of the Church, was a holy act which brought the giver a blessing, and so the subtle Chinese thought to make his blessing greater by offering a drink better than water.

Ah Kee Au drank with fervor. "My makee holee thliss morn'," he said gladly. "Makee Napoleon more happy." Sincerity is not a matter of broken English or a drink of rum; the poor old grandfather of the little corporal's namesake believed earnestly that Napoleon would improve by his sacramental offering. He, like most Marquesans, took the white man's religion with little understanding. It is new magic to them, a comfort, an occupation, and an entertainment. But who knows the human heart, or understands the soul?

The afternoon while Neo and I lay on my paepae, awaiting the favoring wind which should carry him back to his own isle, my neighbors gathered from far and near to lounge the sunny hours away in conversation. Squatted on the mats, they engaged in serious discussion of the puzzles of religion, appealing to me often to settle vexing questions which they had long wearied of asking their better informed instructors in religious mysteries.

Their native tongue has no word for religion. Bishop Dordillon had been obliged to translate it, "Te mea e hakatika me te mea e hana men koaha toitoi i te Etua," which might be rendered, "Belief in the works and love of a just God." Etua, often spelled Atua, was the name of divinity among all Maori peoples, but religion was so associated with natural things, the phenomena of nature, of living things, and of the heavens and sea, that it was part of daily life and needed no word to distinguish it.

### *Thinking Headaches*

Never were people less able to comprehend the creeds and formulas in which the religious beliefs of the white men are clothed. Marquesans are not deep thinkers. In fact, they have a word, tahoa, which means, "a headache from thinking." Ten years of ardent and nobly self-sacrificing work by missionaries left the islands still without a single soul converted. It was not until the chiefs began to set the seal of their approval on the new outlandish faiths that the people flocked to the standard of the cross. And when they did begin to meditate the doctrines preached to them as necessary beliefs in order to win salvation, their heads ached indeed.

Even after years of faithful churchgoing many of my friends still struggled with their doubts, and when these were propounded to me I was fain to wrinkle my own brow and ponder deeply.

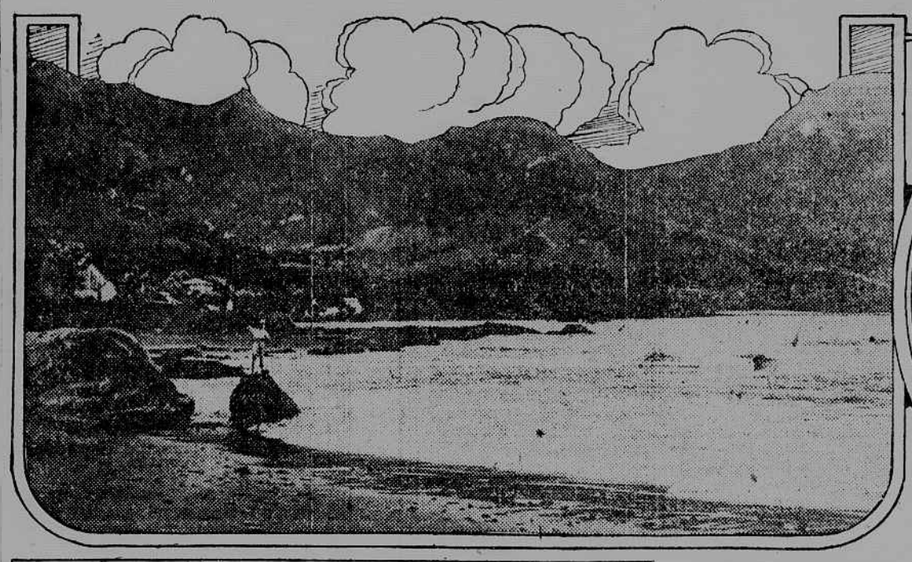
The burning question as to the color of Adam and Eve had long been settled. Adam and Eve were brown, like themselves. But if, as the priests said was most probable, Adam and Eve had received pardon and were in heaven, why had their guilt stained all mankind?

Also, would Satan have been able to tempt Eve if God had not made the tree of knowledge taro? Was not knowledge a good thing? What motive had led the Maker and Knower of All things to do this deed?

What made the angels fall? Pride, said the priests. Then how did it get into heaven? demanded the perplexed.

The resurrection of the body at the last judgment horrified them. This fact, said the husband of Kake, had led to the abandonment of the old manner of burying corpses in a sitting posture, with the face between the knees and the hands under the thighs, the whole bound round with cords. Obviously a man buried in such a position would rise deformed. Their dead in the cemetery on the heights slept now in long coffins of wood, their limbs at ease. But other and less premeditated interments still befell the unwary islander.

What would God do in cases where sharks had eaten a Marquesan? And what, when the same shark had been killed and eaten by other Marquesans? And in the case of the early Christian forefathers, who were eaten by men of other tribes, and afterward the cannibals eaten in retaliation, and then the last feaster eaten by sharks! Aue! There was a headache query!



*A chieftainess in tapa garments*

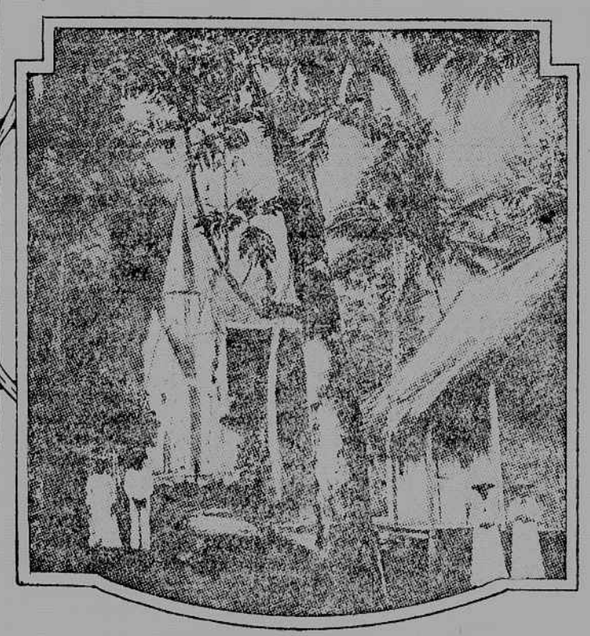
*Above—A native spearing fish*

*Below—Removing a pig cooked in the umu, or native oven*

*On the beach*

*Marquesan cannibals wearing dresses of human hair*

*A Marquesan dancing girl*



*Catholic church at Atuona*